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ESSAY II:
FROM CURRICULUM TO PRACTICE: REMOVING STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE SECONDARY EDUCATION REFORM IN THE AMERICAS

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Introduction: Framing the Problem

Few would question the growing importance of secondary education in the contemporary outlook. Now more than ever, amidst globalization, youth require sophisticated and engaging pedagogies that will enable them to navigate the social, moral, and technological complexity of the modern world, and to recapture a sense of excitement, purpose, and wonder in learning. Ideally, schools can provide youth with the tools to navigate this new landscape. Yet sadly, schools and school systems in our region still reflect the bureaucratic, state-building imperatives of an older age. With all too few exceptions, and often in spite of their own best efforts, schools attempt to instill standardized knowledge through authoritarian means.

Important steps have already been taken to address this legacy. Secondary education reforms across the Americas have asserted quality, equity, and relevance as their watchwords. Since the early 1990s, most countries have made some level of secondary education compulsory, especially through the age of 15, thereby expanding both public access and state responsibility for educational provision. More recent reforms make the entire secondary cycle mandatory in some countries, thereby signaling a change in the definition of the aims of secondary education, and the role it fulfills in the provision of equal opportunities. In most cases, moreover, new curriculum and new pedagogical guidelines have been re-focused around the interests and concerns of adolescents and youth. Following global trends, education reforms in the region have abandoned the behaviorist assumptions of the past and engaged constructivist pedagogies for meaningful learning. Student-centered and dialogical discussion, group inquiry projects, transversal themes, and competency-based learning objectives are the order of the day. Teachers, it is said, no longer merely teach a subject; they teach a whole person—the student—THROUGH their subject.

We view these developments as largely salutary. Yet despite these promising policy and curriculum trends, most observers would agree that secondary education reform is still far from achieving its goals of increasing student retention, raising academic achievement, challenging poverty and inequality, and educating youth to face the critical challenges of our times. Indeed, there is some evidence that such reforms have constituted little more than a symbolic shift in priorities. While important gains have been made in overall student enrollment, and some gains

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appear to have been made in the quality of student learning, overall the results of reform are disappointing at best.[2] In short, there is a long and torturous road leading from reforms of curriculum and pedagogy to the practices of teaching and learning, and few survive the trip. Why is this the case?

In this essay we will argue that recent investments in equity innovations and in curriculum reform for relevance and quality have not been accompanied by the kinds of structural reforms necessary for **effective implementation**. To be sure, curriculum reform itself is not complete; policymakers must continue to reduce the proliferation of contents and seek greater thematic coherence for comprehension, application, and problem-solving. Yet most importantly, new curriculum must be accompanied by structural reforms and strategic increases in spending in order to make reform goals feasible. The structural reforms that we highlight here concern institutional organization and capacity, teacher preparation, training, and hiring, and the state-civil society relationship. Such structural reforms, which we detail below, will require clarity of vision, consensus-building, and the political will to challenge entrenched interests.

Before undertaking this analysis, a brief digression on the purposes of secondary education would seem to be in order. Indeed, we see part of the problem of secondary reform as a reflection of the ambiguity (or perhaps it is the multiplicity) of purpose that permeates policy discussions and documents about this level of schooling. As is well known, basic secondary education may either constitute the final stage of formal schooling for youth who will enter the labor market, or further preparation for advanced studies in the secondary and tertiary sectors. For some, then, secondary education must, above all, prepare youth effectively for productive economic life, while for others, it must prepare youth for advanced studies. While such goals are not inherently contradictory, they do represent differing emphases and orientations that find expression in teachers' professional attitudes and practices.

To overcome this ambiguity, we propose an **integral formation for exercising democratic citizenship** as the overarching purpose of secondary schooling in the Americas. We believe that a focus on democratic citizenship can overcome the specious divide between vocational and advanced humanistic learning, between technical competence and critical understanding. Why must skills training for the job market preclude an education in critical discernment? Why must the development of, say, rhetorical skills for deliberation, or mediating skills for peaceful conflict resolution, preclude the cultivation and application of mechanical knowledge? We reject as false the often-tragic ideological distinction made between mental and manual labor.

Exercising democratic citizenship means much more than participating in electoral outcomes or even contributing to public deliberation. Democratic citizenship education includes the full panoply of knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for a human being to achieve his/her full potential as a member of a local, national, and global community. Such a conception requires the acquisition of advanced literacy and numeracy to effectively communicate across multiple social, disciplinary, and professional borders, and to contribute meaningfully to the economic development and prosperity of a society; as well as the acquisition of moral and cognitive dispositions for respectful deliberation, intercultural communication, critical discernment, and creative problem-solving.

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[2] See PREAL (2005) for a sobering assessment of educational reform through 2006, with an emphasis on poor teacher training efforts and dubious cognitive gains. Hanushek and Woessmann (2009) make an intriguing, empirically substantiated argument about the relationship between low cognitive gains in education and low rates of economic growth in Latin America.

To be sure, recent reforms in Argentina (2006), Mexico (2006), and Chile (2009) place citizenship formation at the heart of secondary education. Yet more can be done beyond curriculum. Education for democratic citizenship also requires constantly revisiting and redefining the meanings of quality, equity, and relevance. Quality must be defined broadly and inclusively, and measured through **qualitative** as well as quantitative indicators. Equity must be understood in terms of a commitment to education as a **public** good, bringing together different sectors of society and providing equal educational opportunities to all for reaching full potential. Relevance must be defined **locally** and contextually, while still allowing for expanding life-projects defined by students' curiosity and aspirations to both self and societal improvement.

Finally, if democratic citizenship is the overarching purpose of secondary education, then the policy process for secondary education reform itself must embody some of the best qualities of democratic citizenship: transparency, full and equal participation, respectful deliberation and attention to diversity, and peaceful resolution of conflicts. As with democratic deliberation more generally, there can be **no shortcuts** to full and knowledgeable involvement of all interested parties. As democratic consciousness matures across the Americas, there can also be **no going back**: reform can no longer be imposed as a project of technocratic elites, or as a result of backroom agreements between the State, private capital, and international agencies. The gap between educational policy-making and the real conditions of policy implementation is unsustainable in the long run; overcoming it requires democratic efforts to meaningfully engage all educational actors.

Structural Obstacles to Reform Implementation and their Cultural Correlates

Generalization about secondary education reform across the Americas is difficult, to say the least. Indeed, depending on the national system, the very term "secondary education" can refer to the post-primary years ranging from year 6 through year 12 (ages 11-18), and distinct combinations thereof. We focus our comments and observations on the post-primary ages of 12-16. Moreover, we draw primarily on the extensive research experience of the first author in Mexico. For twenty years, Bradley Levinson has studied the Mexican secundaria, from the perspectives and experiences of its students (1999, 2001) to the efforts of its most accomplished administrators and policymakers (2004). The analysis of Mexico's experience in secondary education reform has been supplemented by analysis of reform efforts in other Latin American countries, particularly Colombia (home country of the second author, Casas), Argentina, and Chile. Based on this work, we venture to highlight the following common structural problems:

- A still-centralized curriculum planning process which, despite decentralization reforms, lacks broad legitimacy and stakeholder buy-in, and which relies on inefficient "trickle-down" processes of information, socialization, and teacher training.
- The **contradiction** between competencies-based curricular reform for educational relevance and meaningful learning, and both the organizational culture of schools and standardized systems of school scheduling and assessment.
- A system of teacher training, both pre-service, and in-service, that is poorly articulated to national reform efforts, and that is largely isolated from the best content knowledge in the fields.
- The depreciation of teacher salaries and the de-professionalization of teaching, that – along with opaque systems of teacher hiring – force teachers to juggle too many jobs and students, decreases morale, and discourages high-achieving students from joining the ranks.

- An overly politicized and personalized system of regional supervision, and the lack of mid-level support structures to effectively bind policy-making intentions with policy implementation.
- A structure and practice of schooling that lags behind – and even undermines - the process of institutional democratization occurring in most countries in the hemisphere.

In addition to highlighting these structural problems, we also identify what we consider their "cultural correlates," that is, attitudes, habits, and beliefs of educational practitioners that are deeply implicated in such structures. As students of the history of education reform point out (e.g., Tyack and Tobin, 1994), school-level cultures often persist in the face of continuing reform; such cultures constitute a kind of "deep grammar" of schooling, the sedimentation of earlier structures and discourses. Structural and cultural changes must be pursued simultaneously, for they are fully interdependent.

The persistence of centralized planning in curriculum reform

Though judged largely a success in most instances (e.g., Grindle, 2004), decentralization reforms of the 1990s in Latin American countries failed to alter the centralized habits of educational planning and curriculum reform. To be sure, curriculum planning was never a goal of the earlier decentralization efforts; while much educational **administration** and decision-making has been decentralized, national ministries of education still reserve the right to set policy and establish curriculum. The continued centralization of most planning and curriculum in national education ministries can be attributed to a number of causes, ranging from the traditional prerogatives of national integration and nation-state formation, to the concentration of technical capacity in capital cities and the need to assure minimal levels of quality for all students.

While there may still be good reasons for some measure of centralized curriculum planning, we see clear evidence of its drawbacks. Despite increased efforts to involve teachers and administrators in the testing and development of new curriculum, such efforts are usually perceived to fall short. Local educational actors rarely perceive their interests and concerns represented in the new policy and curriculum, and local environmental and cultural knowledge gets left aside. Moreover, the absence of a vital and recursive curriculum construction process at the local level de-professionalizes teachers, lowers their morale, and makes them feel like mere appendages of a hierarchical system. Finally, the concentration of curriculum planning in national ministries leads to deformations and inefficiencies in the implementation stage: Materials arrive late, if at all, while training sessions are conducted by those far removed from the curriculum planning process, who may have little knowledge of the curriculum logic itself, or the local context in which it is to be implemented.

The cultural correlates of centralized curriculum planning often include cynicism, mistrust, and apathy. With little to no involvement in the curriculum process, teachers and administrators assume little responsibility for implementing something that feels foreign to them, created by someone who "sits behind a desk in the capital," as teachers are heard to say. Moreover, they are often not certain whether the reform will persist. Take the case of Mexico: Because Mexican educational policymaking has often been subject to the vicissitudes of the six-year presidential administrations known as *sexenios*, continuity has sometimes been difficult to achieve. Teachers that have been in schools for a number of years will note the grand rhetoric that accompanies the inauguration of a new *sexenio*; they observe the arrival and departure of

educational reforms, and they see that very little changes in the end. Thus, they adopt an attitude of stoic resignation, *aguante*.

Mixed with this sense of powerlessness and resignation is often a more active critique of the duplicity of educational authorities. Many teachers have developed a profound suspicion of such authorities, viewing them as apologists for demagogic politicians and self-serving bureaucrats in a "country of lies" (Sefchovich, 2008). They see training programs as mere exercises in "simulation," conducted to fulfill bureaucratic imperatives but lacking substance or seriousness. Likewise, they may see curriculum "consultations" as a symbolic form of participation that serves more to legitimate central planning than to meaningfully channel teachers' ideas and concerns. Ultimately, this is a problem of trust that could take years to address, but any meaningful reform must begin now by involving teachers thoroughly, from the beginning.

Finally, we may also surmise that another strong cultural correlate of centralized planning is the persistence of teachers' authoritarian attitudes and practices, which may lead to a reluctance or inability to adopt the new pedagogical focus of most secondary reform. One fall afternoon in 2002 Levinson was chatting with a regional pedagogical advisor (*jefe de enseñanza*) in the Mexican state of Morelos. On this occasion, he was asking the *jefa de ensenañza*, a sixty-something former history teacher who was now in charge of disseminating the new citizenship education program, "Formación Cívica y Ética," what she thought of the way the subject was being taught in schools. She expressed some exasperation and said that many teachers were simply not grasping the new dialogical focus of the program. She described how some teachers were still relying too heavily on the textbook and dictating passages for their students to copy. In an irritated tone, she finished her lament: "*Ya pasó el tiempo de los dictadores, pues*" (The reign of the dictators is over, come on!). The word "dictator" in this phrase can refer either to a tyrannical political leader or to the type of teacher who dictates notes and generally leads an authoritarian classroom, where only one correct response is possible. Unfortunately, most teachers throughout the Americas continue to be dictators in their classrooms. Not only are they reproducing the teaching styles that they experienced in their own schooling, they are also reproducing the stance of passive obedience that they are encouraged to take as quasi-professionals in a hierarchical system of educational authority. As supposedly dutiful agents of curriculum reform, teachers may simply encourage in their own students the same uncritical relation to supposedly objective curricular knowledge passed down from on high that they themselves experience as system subordinates.

In addressing the structural obstacle of centralized educational planning and curriculum, we ask: How can we break the cycle of submission and cynicism by including teachers and other educational practitioners more fully in the curriculum planning process? What new educational actors or mechanisms—local school councils, regional citizens' observatories—could be included to increase stakeholder buy-in and improve curriculum contextualization? How can we bridge the gap between the design of curricular reforms and the implementation of actual changes in the students' educational experiences?

Engaged learning and organizational conditions for assessment: An exercise in contradiction?

For nearly twenty years now, there has been a virtual consensus that the rote, encyclopedic instructional techniques of the past no longer serve our students well (if they ever did, at that!). An implicit behaviorism has given way to various constructivisms. In language learning, for instance, curriculum and pedagogy has moved from phonetics, decontextualized

grammar, and textual memorization to meaningful production and interpretation of whole words and texts; in citizenship education, curriculum and pedagogy has moved from the memorization of constitutional articles to animated dialogue and engaged problem-solving. The movement to define learning in terms of competencies (*saber hacer*) rather than mere cognitive knowledge (*saber*) is one manifestation of this trend. So, too, is the recognition that powerful learning best takes place in a caring community and a supportive environment, where youth can develop strong identities as learners who contribute to the collective good.

Over nearly the same period of time, we have witnessed the standards-based movement and the growth of accountability systems for student achievement, as well as entrance exams for middle (*educación media*) and higher education. The standards and accountability movements grew over concerns about uneven educational quality across schools, poor teacher and school performance, and the lack of a substantive mechanism for aligning the different components of the educational system (i.e. teacher education, funding schemes, curriculum, assessment, and textbook production, among others). Largely influenced by administrative science, and heralded by business leaders concerned with the region's lack of competitiveness, the push for standards has become increasingly common in recent executive educational reforms – as opposed to the more openly debated reforms that follow the legislative path.

The overlap of both of these movements, in school settings characterized by antiquated structures and practices, has led to unpredictable and unproductive forms of syncretism. The system's demands on teachers, administrators, and students, to conform to what seem to be epistemically and philosophically dissonant expectations have created a situation in which strategically adaptive behavior rather than pedagogical reasoning prevails.

Among the older school structures and practices are schedules that severely fragment the school day and year, and place great emphasis on the recording of grades. Mexican scholars like Rafael Quiroz have been analyzing this problem of fragmentation for years (Quiroz, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1996; Weiss, Quiroz, and Santos del Real, 2005). In Mexico, the secondary school year is divided into 5 grading periods, for which teachers of every subject are required to submit grades for all of their students. After the 2006 reform, which sought to consolidate school subjects, students are still enrolled in some 10 distinct subjects of study, and the school day is typically divided into 7 50-minute periods for these subjects. Moreover, this fragmentation coexists with a bureaucratic infrastructure created to monitor student attendance and report their grades to the regional supervisor. Teachers and support personnel have to spend an inordinate amount of time on paperwork, and this takes away from time they might spend on more productive or engaging activities with the students. The "logic of evaluation," as Rafael Quiroz calls it, often leads teachers to objectify knowledge and seek shortcuts for assessing learning. As one Mexican administrator put it to Levinson, "We experience a daily conflict between administrative needs and pedagogical needs, and it's almost always the pedagogical needs that come out on the losing end." There is evidence that such problems exist throughout the Americas.

Finally, in Mexico and elsewhere, local material conditions prohibit pedagogical innovation and inspire conformity. Crumbling classrooms, rigid school architecture, and the absence of computer technology militate against education for new competencies and for new applications of knowledge. To be sure, infrastructure development and computer connectivity have risen to the top of some reform agendas in Latin America; while these efforts are laudable, they are clearly not enough.

Needless to say, most teachers are living a contradiction. On the one hand, the new curriculum reform exhorts them to teach students real-life competencies, and to create a collegial

learning community. On the other hand, the assessment and accountability structures, both new and old, force them into facile learning tasks, and "teaching to the test." Short class periods allow for little continuity or depth in teaching, and high numbers of students who must be assigned grades on a frequent basis make the development of any sense of an inquiry community or intimacy between teacher and student nearly impossible. In addition, no systematic efforts have been made to educate teachers to plan and teach for developing competencies. The shift in curricular paradigms is deep enough that structured, sustained, and well-funded training strategies are indispensable for its success.

Amidst such contradictory conditions, we must ask: Are these movements and tendencies (competencies and standards) compatible? Can we prepare teachers and organize schools for meaningful competency-based learning if we also insist that students perform well on exams that continue to assess limited cognitive knowledge? Can we develop meaningful and engaged learning environments for students amidst short class periods, highly differentiated subject matter, onerous bureaucratic administrative requirements, and impoverished material conditions?

The ad hoc nature of teacher training

Most reform efforts in secondary education call attention to the centrality of teacher training (*formación docente*). At any given moment of reform, there is a tremendous challenge involved: How to create new programs for pre-service teacher training (*formación inicial*) that align with the reform, and, perhaps more importantly, how to create effective programs for in-service teachers' professional development (*formación continua, o actualización*). We will address each of these in turn.

Historically, most teacher training in the Americas occurred in separate normal schools. Originally, these normal schools operated at the level of secondary or middle education (*educación media*), and they were oriented mainly to primary school teachers. Eventually, throughout most of the hemisphere, normal schools were re-calibrated at the level of higher education, requiring teacher candidates to have the equivalent of a high-school degree to begin their course of studies. Still, normal schools have typically maintained their separate institutional status, and they are often administered by a separate branch of the education ministry.

In those countries where a separate system of normal schools continues to be the dominant modality for pre-service teacher training, different structural problems persist. Communication and coordination between the administrative branch in charge of normal schools and the branch in charge of curriculum reform can be difficult, if not very deliberately addressed. Normal school professors, moreover, have little accountability for their performance, and little incentive for their own ongoing professional development. Often, it has been many years since they practiced teaching in a basic education classroom, and their exposure to the reform process may be only incidental.

In other countries, where multiple institutions for pre-service teacher education coexist, different but related problems have emerged. The variety of routes to teacher licensure has created differentiated hiring schemes and antagonistic subcultures. Moreover, differing levels of autonomy and independence from government regulation, along with different forms of ideological indoctrination, have fostered a multiplicity of stances vis-à-vis government-led education reforms. Young teachers may be socialized into political stances that hinder the possibility of dialogue or alignment with other administrative and philosophical orientations.

Finally, in the process of teacher education, parents, students, and civil society organizations are often shut out from participating. Citing their professional prerogatives, teacher educators eschew the grounded knowledge and expertise that such actors could contribute.

Meanwhile, in-service teacher education often suffers from problems of competence, access, legitimacy, and over-specialization. As with normal school systems, programs and systems for in-service development may also be run out of a different branch of the national ministry, with all of the attendant problems of coordination and communication this implies. Ultimately, much in-service education is delivered by "technical" teams in states or municipalities, or by unsupervised consultants and non-governmental organizations. There is little oversight or strict professional qualification for the demonstrated competence of such technicians. Moreover, in-service workshops are typically offered during a short session at the beginning of the school year, or on select professional development days throughout the school year. Some administrators are reluctant to release their teachers to participate in such workshops, and some teachers find excuses not to attend. There is little accountability in such matters, either for the administrator who discourages his teachers from participating, or for the teacher who opts not to attend. In cases where attendance is good, the low competence of the workshop providers may lead to a legitimacy problem, in which the aforementioned cynicism and apathy of teachers may find fruitful terrain. Finally, in-service workshops are often conducted according to subject-matter specialty. Even though reform efforts attempt to create a more holistic conception of secondary education, with emphasis on inter-disciplinary themes and competencies, in-service workshops rarely bring together teachers across their disciplines. This simply contributes to teachers' overly strong specialization and identification with their strict subject matter.

Unexamined assumptions and wishful thinking pervade existing practices of in-service teacher education. Educational authorities seek to accomplish major educational transformations through one-time in-service trainings; such trainings may look good as policy indicators (e.g., "10,000 teachers were trained in…"), but they fail to generate robust capacities and transformative practices. There is also too great a reliance on "trickle down" models, which presume that a few teachers per school or district will faithfully and adequately reproduce the training they received. Finally, little accountability follows such training to provide incentive for its application; in many countries, teachers receive financial incentives to attend such trainings, but no measures are taken to ensure that the training has actually enhanced classroom practices.

Regarding the structural obstacles in teacher training, we must ask: How can pre-service teacher training and in-service teacher development be better coordinated with other dimensions of reform? How can new forms of accountability and quality control be built into the teacher education process? How can new and more imaginative formats for in-service teacher education be created? And when in-service teacher education is done well, how can we create incentives and assessments to ensure that teachers apply what they have learned?

Teacher hiring and the myth of collegiality

As with the curriculum and the organization of the school day, most systems of teacher hiring in our region are highly fragmented, with teachers occupying part-time positions across more than one school. Moreover, hiring is often highly personalized, subject to patron-client union relationships rather than professional training. Teachers with more experience, or better union connections, eventually occupy the choice positions at the "best" urban schools. All of these aspects of teacher hiring obstruct reform goals of effective, community-based learning, collegial lesson planning, and educational equity.

A recent census of Argentinean teachers found that seven out of ten secondary teachers work in at least two schools, and 30% work in three or more.[3] In a similar situation, in Mexico, secondary teachers are hired by "hours," not necessarily full-time positions. Many secondary teachers start off with just a few hours in a school, teaching a single subject to a single group of students. Often, they have acquired this position by serving for many years in school support positions (secretary, janitor), through personal connections to union representatives, or because they have bought or "inherited" the position, not because of their experience or the quality of their training. Once teachers acquire some hours, and begin accumulating more over the years, it is virtually impossible to lose them. Moreover, in order to paste together sufficient hours for a full-time position, teachers must often teach a number of disparate classes throughout the day, even at different schools within the same city or region. This gives rise to the phenomenon of so-called "taxicab teachers," common throughout much of our region. It is not unusual for *secundaria* teachers of lesser subject areas (e.g., English-3 hours a week; Art—2 hours a week) to give 10 hours of the class to 5 different groups in the morning shift, 10 hours to five other groups in the afternoon shift, and yet another 10-20 hours in a different school altogether.

This same system of hourly hiring also accounts for the structural obstacles in creating a truly collegial, joint process of curriculum planning and teaching. Teachers come and go throughout the school day, often juggling several jobs, both in and out of schools. They are rarely paid for "planning hours" beyond their actual student contact hours in classrooms. Thus, the much-vaunted reform goal of teacher collaboration (*trabajo colegiado*) in lesson planning and teaching is dead on arrival. Such collaboration is one of the main goals of the 2006 reform in Mexico, with the "transversal" themes of environment, gender, and values supposedly at the heart of joint planning. Yet little of this is practically realized. Instead, the individualistic culture of teaching, often inculcated first in pre-service schools, is reinforced by the fragmented local structure of work contracts. All of this effectively prohibits collegial planning and reflection.

Teachers cannot be expected to innovate, conduct research, and develop context-relevant pedagogical content and pedagogical alternatives, if these activities are not remunerated fairly. Due to its developmental uniqueness, secondary education also requires a stronger bond between teachers and students, and tighter teacher teamwork and coordination. None of this is feasible unless teachers are able to stay in the school beyond their teaching hours and be purposively involved in the educational community. Rather than individual-based hiring practices, new team-building models should be developed that privilege teaching as a collective enterprise.

In the context of fragmented teacher hiring and employment, we must ask: How can teacher hiring practices be rationalized and regularized to permit more full-time employment in single schools? How can schools implement spaces and structures for making joint lesson planning feasible and accountable?

The reign of bureaucracy: Administration, supervision, and information systems

In the research literature on secondary education, perhaps the least is known about mid-level administrative actors known as "*mandos medios*": state and region-level technical personnel, regional supervisors, and pedagogical advisors. It is clear that such actors are critical to the success of reform efforts, yet little is done to professionalize their qualifications, or to involve and train them in the reform implementation process. Moreover, long-standing legal and

[3] Censo Nacional de Docentes, 2004, cited in Ministerio de Educación (2008).

bureaucratic requirements, along with antiquated information systems, have not been touched by reform.

In many cases, state and region-level administrative personnel are political or union appointees who do not always have the qualifications or experience necessary for the job. In cases where supervisors and technical assistants may have years of administrative experience, it is often only as school principals. Throughout the region, there exist few dedicated training programs for such mid-level leadership. Rather, it is a matter of "on-the-job" training. Secretaries and underlings typically provide these administrators with most of the training they need, yet such workers are precisely the ones most adept at "making do" with the older systems of information-gathering and reporting.

In Mexico, the widely generalized figure of the "jefes de enseñanza" is a potentially powerful but currently under-utilized resource for reform efforts. The jefe de enseñanza is a kind of pedagogical advisor, defined by subject area, who is in charge of visiting, observing, and mentoring teachers of his/her subject within the region covered. But jefes are typically late-career teachers who come into their positions as a kind of pre-retirement perk after having served as school principals or statewide administrators. Many years may have passed since they taught in a classroom, and there is little accountability for their job performance. Moreover, much of their time, too, is spent fulfilling bureaucratic reporting requirements rather than in substantive pedagogical advising and training.

The cultural correlates of such a hierarchical, bureaucratic system include conformity, control, and routinization. Mid-level actors strive, above all, to fulfill (*cumplir*) administrative requirements, rather than provide vision and leadership. Such actors impose their will on underlings, and reinforce the chain of command to which they themselves are subjected.

A correlated structural problem that limits the system's capacity to respond quickly and appropriately to the challenges it faces is the lack of strong information systems that go beyond payroll, enrollment, and testing data. Guaranteeing equal access to quality education requires all schools and educational jurisdictions to maintain quality-oriented, streamlined information systems that combine quantitative data (i.e. test scores, attrition rates, investment) with qualitative data that enable educational actors to make context-relevant decisions. Quality should be broadly defined to include criteria such as school atmosphere, democratization of internal processes, school-community integration, and student participation. To be fair, development of such comprehensive information systems is still incipient around the world, but the strong traditions of humanistic education and qualitative action-research that originated in our region could make the Americas a fertile ground for their generation. Moreover, information systems, and mid-level supervision and support structures ought to have a tighter coupling than they have had in the past. Seeing them as functionally separate components is costly, and gives room to haphazard reform, or even counter-reform. Rather, we see the development of supervisory and consultative support structures at the regional and district level as absolutely indispensable to effective reform implementation.

Amidst the stultifying bureaucratic regime sketched here, we must ask: How can the system of supervision and technical-pedagogical assistance in states and localities be professionalized and modernized to accompany reform efforts? How can information systems be updated, expanded, and utilized to drive the quality-oriented reforms? And who should be responsible and accountable for the realization of such changes?

The undemocratic school and the muted voice of the student

Most of the large-scale educational overhauls of the 1990s focused, in some way, on accompanying the democratization processes that swept across Latin America and the Caribbean. Educational discourse changed, and claims were made for a new school – and a new structure of schooling – that fostered the kind of political culture necessary for democracy to take hold, and to prevent authoritarian regressions. Some of the structural changes proposed in these reforms involved the creation or strengthening of participatory mechanisms for decision-making at the school level. Suddenly, there were experiments in "school-based management," the creation of "social participation councils," and the like. Collegiate bodies emerged that incorporated representation from teachers, parents, and, in some cases, the surrounding communities as well as the business sector. More rarely, students were included as well. The years that have followed have been marked by ongoing experimentation with functionally similar forms of school government (e.g., Mexico's *Programa de Escuelas de Calidad*), which allegedly symbolize the democratization of schooling. The implementation, however, has been less effective and complete than policy pronouncements might indicate.

Throughout our region, secondary students continue to suffer from a common adult perception of them as half-formed and irresponsible persons, not capable of assuming leadership roles or asserting a voice about the conditions of their own schooling. The "discourse of adolescence" rules out secondary students as reasonable interlocutors in the policy process (Levinson, 1999, 2001; Stevick and Levinson, 2003; Tenti Fanfani, 2004). Meanwhile, the combination of a trend towards business-like managerialism, which attempts to reformat the everyday life of schools for efficiency, with the pervasive presence of traditional authoritarian and corrupt practices, makes real participation by students challenging, to say the least. Exercises in student government and other forms of student participation have largely failed across the continent, since the administrative and political will to make them work has been absent. With the exception of the Penguin movement in Chile in 2006, where mobilization unfolded beyond institutional mechanisms, little can be found in terms of successful student involvement in educational decision-making.

Because of young children's lack of maturity, in primary education, some of these arrangements that presumably support student participation in educational decision-making can maintain a largely symbolic role, without many adverse consequences. Yet much more is at stake if the goal of implementing democratic methods and structures within schools fails in secondary education. For many students, this is the final stage of formal schooling, and thus the last opportunity for the educational system to develop in students the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and, most importantly, the experiences that could translate into active support and defense of democracy. Involving students in determining features of their own educational experience is the "final frontier" of democratizing the policy process, not to mention the best available practice in citizenship education.

A democratic secondary school fosters not only participation, but also intercultural recognition and communication. Quality must include evaluation of intercultural competencies, that is, predispositions and abilities to appreciate and communicate across differences of social origin, gender, and ethnicity. In concert with social policies designed to encourage participation and empowerment of previously disenfranchised members of society, schools must work to overcome the homogenizing, monocultural practices of the past. Only through meaningful intercultural practices can secondary schools be brought in line with the new pluricultural legal frameworks emerging across the Americas.

We suggest, finally, that democratizing the school would significantly improve levels of retention and secondary school completion. Students who are fully engaged in the process of learning, and fully invested in the life of the institution, are much less likely to leave school. To be sure, one of the primary reasons for attrition at the secondary level continues to be economic. Families living in poverty often cannot afford the opportunity costs to keep their children in school when such children could be contributing in small, but meaningful ways to the household economy. Still, Levinson's and Martin's (1994) work with Mexican students and families suggests that brute economic realities do not simply determine the level of school completion. Rather, there is often an active negotiation, even struggle, between children and their families about whether or not to continue their schooling. If students feel like they belong in school, that they can participate meaningfully and construct aspirations around continued schooling, then they are much more likely to succeed academically AND convince their parents to make the sacrifices necessary to support further schooling.

Thus, we end by asking: How can student participation be transformed into a meaningful experience of democracy in our structures of schooling? How can we challenge the discourse of adolescence and transcend the easy trap of grand policy pronouncements to make democracy in schools a tangible reality?

Recommendations and Conclusions

A number of concluding recommendations follow logically from the challenges and obstacles we have identified here. These recommendations require varying levels of resources and political will, and we have no illusions about how easy they might be to implement. Nevertheless, we insist that these are among the most critical initiatives to accompany the next generation of secondary education reforms in the Americas. As we've said earlier, there can be no shortcuts, and there can be no going back. Reforms that are only determined by, and therefore launched at, expedient political conjunctures, are ultimately doomed to failure.

--We recommend more effective mechanisms for channeling broad societal input into curriculum, especially from teachers and civil society groups; for adapting curriculum to regions and social groups; and for modifying curriculum progressively over time. For reform to take root and endure, it must be the result of a democratized policy dialogue (Levinson et al., 2009). Until now, the State, teachers' unions, and international lending agencies have been the primary participants in such dialogue, with limited participation of teachers, parents, and students. With the maturing of civil society under democratization, and the creation of new citizens' watchdog and stakeholder organizations (e.g., *Observatorio Ciudadano de la Educación*), the State must urgently abandon elite strategies of "expertise from above" for curriculum reform, and instead develop new means and channels for societal dialogue. Developing trust between governments and other educational actors, and promoting fluid, inclusive, and cooperative relationships based on transparency should be at the top of the educational agenda for the Americas.

In addition to curriculum reform per se, new mechanisms must also be created for ongoing reflexive curriculum modification and implementation. In Mexico, two important aspects of the 2006 reform could be held up as potential models: The creation for each subject in *secundaria* of the Inter-Institutional Consultative Councils (*Consejos Consultivos Interinstitucionales*), which bring together representatives from non-governmental organizations, different government ministries, and the academy to study the implementation of the curriculum and provide recommendations for modifying it; and the creation of a dynamic, reflexive process of Continuing Study (*Seguimiento*), which involves state-level authorities in conducting empirical

research in schools to study how the reform is being implemented, and what problems are appearing there. While these two innovations seem promising, what remains unclear is whether and how their findings and recommendations might actually be incorporated into policy and further reform. Without specifying a process and timetable for vetting and incorporating suggested changes, such important innovations run the risk that we have already mentioned: they may be perceived as symbolic window dressing for decisions already made by national educational authorities, and thus generate more cynicism.

--In order to address and minimize the contradictions between constructivist pedagogies and both traditional and new standardized assessments, we recommend so-called "block scheduling" of 2-3 hour periods, to maximize possibilities for organizing in-depth group learning (This of course, implies a corresponding change in the practices of teacher hiring). We also recommend no more than two full grading periods per year, perhaps punctuated by more flexible and subject-specific evaluations of "*tramos de aprendizaje*," as being proposed in Argentina.

Greater diversity and innovation in educational assessment are clearly necessary. Granted, decision-making at the national level often requires countrywide data, but that need should not dictate an exclusive marriage with standardized testing. Indeed, modeling national assessment tools after cross-national survey studies (PISA, TIMSS, IEA) potentially threatens the development of an ecology of approaches to assessment, and, consequently, the possibility of satisfying contextual requirements, not to mention the principles of competency-based education. Indeed, competencies-based curricula require creative forms of assessment that reinforce rather than undermine the cognitive and social goals that inspire them. As a possible move in the right direction, we salute the effort made by six Latin American countries to transcend the de facto limitations on standardized assessment that has privileged only a few areas of the curriculum (Math, Language, and Science) by virtue of their measurability, and work together towards the development of an assessment instrument for citizenship competencies.[4] We hope, however, that the final result of this joint venture, if constructed as a conventional standardized survey, does not sacrifice vital qualitative and contextual elements of citizenship education.

--Without doubt, teacher training, teacher hiring, and teacher professionalization continue to be central challenges for effective secondary education reform. Teachers must be reconceived as absolutely essential to the design and execution of reform, rather than as an afterthought. As Torres (2000) suggests, they must become the "subjects of change" rather than the "agents of reform."

There are a number of more specific recommendations we would make. First, we advocate reform of pre-service education systems. Preferably, pre-service teacher education would now be located in universities, as in the North American model. Teacher candidates would take content courses in the respective departments and faculties of the disciplines, but pursue studies of pedagogy and education in a separate department, with dynamic school-practicum relationships created. Where such a re-structuring is not feasible or desirable, we urge the reform of existing pre-service schools, with increased accountability for instructors' level of knowledge and performance. For in-service teacher development, we recommend the creation of reform "institutes," run by state education ministries or normal schools, consisting of specially trained professors and "master teachers" who have spent significant time in the classroom and fully understand the principles of reform.

[4] El Sistema Regional de Evaluation y Desarrollo de Competencias Ciudadanas (SREDECC). See: http://www.sredecc.org/index.php

Second, on issues of teacher hiring and performance: It is imperative to move toward the creation of full-time teaching positions, so that teachers can invest themselves in a particular institution and develop the security and commitment that go along with it (One promising development comes from Colombia: Decree 1850, of 2002, regulated the school day, making it mandatory for all teachers to have a 22 hr. academic assignment (teaching time), and 18 hrs. of planning, administrative and pedagogical work. Teachers must be physically present in the school at least 6 hrs a day). It would also be important to implement differentiated compensation packages ("hardship pay") to incentivize experienced teachers' service amongst neediest student populations; presently, in the absence of any other incentives, the more experienced and talented teachers tend to work in the "best" urban schools. A system of performance-based bonuses and professional development rewards should also be implemented to incentivize teachers' ongoing improvement. Finally, teacher hiring must be rationalized and professionalized, with positions filled through meeting meritocratic criteria. In both promotion and hiring, care must be taken to measure performance and qualifications through a number of quantitative AND qualitative indicators, including character, motivation, knowledge of educational development, and parents' assessment of their children's learning. In Mexico, the application of a new competitive exam (*concurso de oposición*) for teacher placements is a step in the right direction; however, the exam has been rightly criticized for privileging content knowledge only, and leaving aside other important considerations in predicting teacher "quality."

In order to increase collegiality and a culture of reflexivity in schools we recommend the creation of "critical friends groups," like those of the U.S. National School Reform Faculty. Such groups observe one another's classrooms and meet regularly to provide constructive critique; they thereby provide local networks of professional development support. We also recommend the creation of new "master teacher" positions in schools. Such teachers, promoted from within because of their proven effectiveness in the classroom, would be given significant release time from classroom teaching hours to serve as observers and peer mentors to their colleagues. The creation of such a new figure would go a long way toward breaking down the division between teachers and administrators, and toward providing a seasoned, credible, respected set of professional development "experts" in each school.

--In order to facilitate local institutional capacity and rationalize mid-level administrative procedures, we also recommend:

- The creation of higher salaries for top professionals to live and work in state and local education systems
- The development of information systems oriented toward quality rather than quantity of information—not just enrollment levels, "tracking" data, and test results, but also qualitative data on teacher and student performance.
- The resignification of supervisory work, and the development of leadership institutes, to train mid-level supervisors and pedagogical advisors for the kind of motivational and technical competency that reform efforts need in order to succeed.

A final note on teachers' labor organizations

Because of the delicate politics involved, teachers' professional organizations, or unions, are often the "elephant in the room" in discussions of education reform. Everyone sees the elephant, but nobody wants to talk about it. As is well known, teachers' unions are powerful political actors in most of Latin America, and they control major political and administrative posts, especially in the education system. Most of the structural obstacles to effective education

reform that we outline here are related, in one form or another, to the legacy of union power and its corporatist relationship to the State. Too often, union interests become the tail that "wags the dog" of education reform. In most cases, unions benefit from the status quo, which they have played a large role in creating. In other cases, though, the development of stronger unions could actually facilitate the enactment of the supplementary reforms we recommend here. We do not believe therefore that the power of unions must be "broken" in order to facilitate these reforms. We do believe, however, that unions must enter into a new kind of social contract with civil society and demonstrate that their actions are at least as concerned with improving the general educational welfare as they are with improving teachers' benefits and conditions of work. Teachers' unions must impose upon themselves further measures of democratization and professionalization; they must convince the broader society, as well as their own members, that they are committed to transparent reform. . If necessary, changes in union structure and practice must be imposed from outside, by a strong State. Moving teacher organizations away from the stagnant model of oppositional trade unions, and into the form of professional associations could be a positive step in this direction.

The State, meanwhile, must assure that any reform will respect existing labor agreements and not unduly damage teachers' professional and economic standing. For instance, in cases where new curriculum requires the consolidation of existing subjects and/or the alteration of the weekly hours devoted to a subject, teachers should be offered retraining opportunities that would enable them to sustain their level of employment. Only in this way can trust between the State, unions, and civil society be restored, and the rationality of reform efforts be permitted to triumph over the vagaries of material and political interest.

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